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A REMINISCENCE OF DOCTOR CHARLES NESBIT
OF DICKINSON COLLEGE.

BY JAMES DUNCAN.

[The Historical Society has lately received two manuscript notices of Dr. Charles Nesbit of Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pa. The one is by Judge Brackenridge, the other by James Duncan, Auditor-General of Pennsylvania from 1821 to 1824. Mr. Duncan removed to Texas, where he died; he was the brother of Judge Thomas Duncan, and an uncle of the Hon. Robert J. Walker. The sketch by him is here printed.]

Dr. Nesbit was unanimously elected Principal of Dickinson College by the Board of Trustees, the 8th of April, 1784. The meeting was one of the fullest and most respectable that was ever held. In the list of members present on the occasion appeared the names of those accomplished scholars and patrons of science, His Excellency John Dickinson, President of the Board, and Dr. Benj. Rush of Philadelphia. Mr. Dickinson, agreeably to order of the Board, writes to Dr. Nesbit on the 22d of April, notifying him of the appointment. Dr. Nesbit answers this letter from Edinburgh the 30th of June, 1784, acknowledging the receipt of the letter, and of the minute of his appointment; but wishing to put the matter into deliberation by his friends, he begs for further information respecting the nature of the office, the powers and duties of the Principal, and requests to be furnished with a copy of the Charter. Mr. Dickinson lays this communication before the Board, who address Dr. Nesbit in a letter of the 29th Sept., giving in detail every proper explanation and information together with the copy of the Charter as desired. The doctor at length accepts. He sails from Greenock the 23d of April, 1785, and lands in Philadelphia the 9th June following. On his arrival he meets with the warmest reception; and among the literary characters who wait on him, Dr. Rush, who had been so instrumental in his invitation, election, and acceptance of the

charge, is the first to take him by the hand; he receives from him all those marks of politeness and hospitality so pleasing to the stranger, and so grateful to the foreigner. He and his family remain with the doctor until he sets out on his journey for Carlisle, where the college over which he was appointed to preside, was fixed. He arrives at the end of his journey on the 4th of July, that memorable anniversary of American Liberty and Independence, which he had so warmly advocated in his native country. A large concourse of citizens had assembled at the Boiling Spring, the seat of Mr. Ege, to commemorate the day; being apprised of the approach of the doctor, they send a deputation together with the Carlisle Troop of Horse to escort him. He remains with the company assembled on this occasion until the evening, when he enters the town amidst the most general congratulations. On the 5th of July the oath of office is administered to him, but he had scarcely entered upon its duties, ere he and his family were visited with the most afflicting illness, which continued with such unabated violence as to discourage them to such a degree as to bring the doctor to the resolution of relinquishing the charge, and of returning with his family to his own country, in consequence of their bad state of health. He sends in his resignation on the 18th of Oct., which the Board receive with the deepest sorrow, and accept with the utmost reluctance; but health returning with the returning spring, he was unanimously re-elected Principal on the 10th May, 1786. He immediately resumes the duties of the appointment, and such was his zeal, his fidelity and attention to discharge them, *that he was never absent a single day from the college, until he was seized with that fatal illness which deprived us of him.*

In addition to his collegiate charge, he regularly preached in the Presbyterian church alternately with Dr. Davidson the stated pastor; and so great was his devotion to the cause of religion and truth, that he delivered a long course of theological lectures to several classes.

All his various and extensive lectures on logic, metaphysics, on moral philosophy, criticism on the beauties of

the classics, on heathen mythology, and on theology were composed and prepared after he came to this country, and not infrequently were the lectures of the day written only on the night preceding.

The first commencement was held the 26th day of Sept., 1787, when nine young gentlemen received from his hand the first degree into the arts; since which there have graduated no less than 153, and what is no less remarkable than true, and equally honorable to both, no instance ever occurred of any student leaving the walls of the college with the least portion of rancor or ill-will against him—indeed they all loved him as their father—they respected him as their teacher and revered him as a seer.

In his last illness his bodily sufferings appeared most severe, but they were borne without repining. He preserved entire almost to the last all his faculties, except the one which he possessed in such eminent perfection; his memory failed him nearly on the first attack of the disorder, and he never recovered it so collectedly as to enable him to enter upon any lengthy discourse. All his intervals were appropriated to the service of his God, as he lived without attending to the worldly matters of this life, so he died without making any testamentary disposition of his estate. He evaded all conversation which led to this subject, or received it with evident dissatisfaction. When a friend happened to introduce a conversation respecting his works, such was his unaffected modesty, that he appeared offended at the proposition of publishing them.

Every testimonial of respect was paid to his memory; his funeral was large and public. The trustees and students feeling the sincerest grief for their loss, attended his remains to the grave in the character of mourning relations; and a resolution passed the board recommending the wearing of black crape on the left arm for the space of thirty days.

The friendship which subsisted between Dr. Nesbit and the many literary and dignified characters in Scotland and England, with whom he was connected, was not dissolved by his crossing the Atlantic. After his arrival in this

country, the correspondence was continued till his death; and among the various letters of his numerous correspondents are those of Dr. Erskine of Edinburgh, the Earl of Buchan, the Countess of Leven and Melville (formerly Lady Mary Wilhelmina Nesbit), Dr. Thos. Davidson, Dr. McKenzie of Glasgow, Dr. Keith of Morpeth in England, etc.

Few remarkable incidents have happened in his life; indeed there can be but little variety in the life of a man of letters placed in the same sphere of action in which Providence had cast his lot. The occurrences which take place are for the most part not of that dazzling nature which are most likely to attract the admiration of the multitude—to strike the fancy and command the *eclat* of the world. A philosopher who pretends to have made some wonderful discovery in “air” or in the vegetable world, generally receives more flattering notice than the man who composes volumes for the *culture* of “*Mind*,” the advancement of moral and ethical knowledge, and the improvement of youth.

The life of Dr. Nesbit can only be learned from his *death*. It is from his writings and his works that the world will be able to form any correct judgment of his usefulness and worth.